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NSA Contemplates Its Shattered Image

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For 20 years, accusations of unsavory left-wing affiliations were the National Student Association's biggest problem.

Now, ironically, the Association may be destroyed by its involvement in anti-Communist activities of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"Times have changed," acknowledged William B. Welsh, NSA's first president, in an interview yesterday.

Welsh is now 42 and an aide to Vice President Humphrey. When he helped put the Association in operation in 1946-47, he was a Berea College student who had to persuade the country's colleges that the new organization would not be dominated by Communists.

Although the NSA itself had to fight off a Communist effort to take it over in the late 1940s, the Association never lost its reputation as a left-wing organization until Ramparts magazine exposed the connection with the CIA last week.

Liberal Stance

From its beginnings NSA has taken liberal positions on political and academic issues. The left-wing causes of the 1950s, from aid to education to a ban on nuclear testing, all had strong support from the NSA, although the delegates to annual policy-making congresses retained an anti-Communist line in foreign affairs.

In its first years the NSA took a very liberal position on civil rights and civil liberties, at a time when those issues were not as popular as they later became. The Association's second president was a Negro, Ted Harris.

And the NSA has been arguing for 20 years for many of the reforms demanded by students at Berkeley and on other campuses in recent years.

A Trip to Prague

The idea for an American union of students grew out of a trip to Prague in 1946 by 25 young Americans. They represented the U.S. at the founding meeting of the International Union of Students.

One member of this group recalled last week the powerful impression made by the Communist apparatus these young people saw in action at Prague. They decided that something would have to be done if the U.S. was to promote its interests successfully among the world's youth.

Members of this group decided to try to form an American counterpart to the powerful European student unions, and they called a preliminary meeting in Chicago in late 1946. A constitutional convention followed in 1947, at Madison, Wis., where the NSA was born.

The organization had no trouble attracting members, but money was much harder to find. According to Welsh, early officers of the Association often argued the question of how to finance NSA. Welsh and others opposed any outside aid, and this was the Association's policy until 1952, when the first substantial CIA aid was secretly accepted by NSA leaders.

The first annual congresses were dominated by debates on campus issues, but as the Association matured, the outlook of its members broadened. By the early 1950s, national and international topics were the subject of the most intense scrutiny and debate.

The Korean war, McCarthyism and the presidential elections of 1952 each dominated congresses in turn.

Delegates to the congresses —held each summer, usually on the campus of a Midwestern university — remember them as stimulating and exciting. As one former participant put it yesterday, "you had a feeling that big things were happening," a feeling new to most young people.

'Too Radical'

Throughout the 1950s NSA was the target of attacks from various conservative groups, especially the Inter-Fraternity Council, the Pan-Hellenic Council, and the Young Americans for Freedom. All three sponsored efforts to pull local campuses out of the NSA because the Association was "too radical."

Sometimes these campaigns were successful, but nationally the Association continued to thrive (300 schools now belong) and to undertake an increasing number of projects at home and abroad.

Many of NSA's most substantial projects were in the field of civil rights. It currently runs a "Tutorial Assistance Center" to coordinate and aid programs for tutoring underprivileged children under a contract with the Office of Economic Opportunity.

The organization has changed in recent years. Joel L. Fleishman, director of the Yale Summer High School who has missed only a few Congresses since 1952, said yesterday: "It seems to be much more highly organized these days, more highly organized and professional, and a lot less spontaneous."

'Image-Conscious'

"There's been a sense that the organization is in trouble —that it doesn't know what it's up to," Glenn E. Roberts, an Oberlin student, added. "And there's been a lot of image-consciousness," said Roberts.

As a result of the Ramparts revelations, there is certain to be even more image-consciousness in the future. Many old friends of the NSA have suggested in the last week that the time has come to bury the image and the old dog together, and start all over again.